

## CHRISTMAS IN SUMMER

By Charlotte Lohse

IT WAS SALE DAY in the first week of December when I heard about the Christmas party. That was the day Dad sold Betsy, the roan mare. I'll always remember it because I loved Betsy and I was feeling pretty low. I was eleven and a half, and the last two years I had been helping Dad drive the stock into Mooltana, a handful of a place in the far northern end of South Australia. It had been fun that morning, riding the mare through our township. It was a clear hot day. The sun glittered on the glossy young steers as they jostled each other along the narrow street, kicking up great clouds of dust and filling the quiet little town with noisy bawling. The townspeople kept their children off the streets on Sale Day. They were afraid of the long-horned flighty steers. But I rode right behind them, cracking my long whip and keeping them in order. Now and then Betsy reared up on her hind legs, and it was all exciting and sort of glorious.

But when I got in the hooded buggy to drive home with Mum, who had come in to do some shopping, it seemed all the good had gone out of the day. It was going to be awfully lonely without the roan mare. Mum gave me her special slow smile, but I knew she wasn't feeling happy either. You see I just rode Betsy to keep her in shape for Mum, because the roan really belonged to her. Sometimes I thought Mum cared more for Betsy than she did for Dad and me together.

Times were skimpy, and there'd been talk of selling Betsy for quite a while. The night before I'd heard Dad talking to Mum.

"If Old Man Riley offers a topnotch price perhaps we should sell."

Mum's voice was quiet. "Of course, Tim," she said to Dad, "I know Betsy is a luxury we can't afford these days. There are so many other things we need."

I fell asleep in my little room next to the kitchen thinking hopefully that Mr. Riley was a hard bargain-maker and that perhaps he wouldn't even be at the sale. He was though, and he must have really wanted the mare because he paid a whopping good price for her. In spite of the money, I saw Dad's face when it happened, and it

was as long as mine. I knew Dad would never have sold Betsy if there had been any other way.

Now I glanced up at Mum as she drove the gray ponies through the town. She was looking straight ahead, and I had the odd feeling that she was far away even though she was sitting right next to me.

When we came to the big brown house at the end of the street, Mum pulled up the grays. Doctor Brenner's house that was. "Little Doctor" we called him, and we loved him and brought him things from the farm whenever we came into town.

"Hop into the house," Mum said. "It's too late to visit. Give the doctor our regards and tell him we'll see him next Sale Day."

From under the buggy seat she got out a basket carefully covered with a big white tea towel and handed it to me. Eggs, clotted cream, cake and homemade sausages were inside. I'd helped Mum pack them early that morning.

I pulled out the shiny brass knob on the front door and let it spring back, listening to the harsh clanging sound it made echoing down the long passage. Little Doctor himself opened the door.

"Why, Timmie Holden," he said, "I haven't seen you for months. Where's the rest of your family? Aren't they coming in?"

I explained that we couldn't visit because Mum had a sick calf at home and we'd stayed too long at the sale already. And that Dad had had to stay in town.

"Well, anyway," he said, "I want to talk to your mother".

We went through the big front garden, out to the buggy. Little Doctor shook hands with Mum and asked about everyone in the family.

Then he said, "Look here, Mrs. Holden, we've made plans for a Christmas party for the children. I've asked everyone in the town, but I'd like the farm people to come in, too."

Mum said, "A Christmas party! Why, Doctor, I haven't thought about celebrating Christmas for years. Not since I left England."

Little Doctor's blue eyes twinkled. "That's what I thought," he said. "It's high time the children around here saw a Christmas tree. And that's another thing, Mrs. Holden; the best pine trees grow on that hill back of your place. Do you suppose big Tim and young Timmie here could bring in a tree a few days before Christmas?"

Mum's cheeks got pink the way they do when she's all stirred up. "Oh, I'm sure they could. A tall tree with thick wide branches. How high . . . how high could it be?"

Little Doctor laughed. You could see that he was pleased that Mum was so excited.

"Well," he said, "we're having the party in the Town Hall, so I think the tallest tree to be found would be all right." He mopped his face with a big handkerchief. "I hope the good Lord will send us a cool day for it," he said.

The grays were kicking up a fuss, anxious to be off.

"I say," Little Doctor called after us as we started off, "don't forget to get the news around. I want everyone to come."

Mum had often told me about Christmas in England, but I wanted to get everything fresh in my mind, so I had a million questions.

Our farm is fifteen miles north of Mooltana, so we had a long drive ahead of us. It was near sundown, but even when the sun was gone it would still be hot. The thermometer hadn't been below 102 degrees for weeks.

"This time of the year in England," Mum said softly, "it's cold, biting clear cold. When we children came in from school our cheeks and ears were stinging with the lovely icy cold." She sighed. "I'd love to feel that way just once again."

"Funny," I said, "freezing cold there and boiling hot here."

I thought how nice it would be to see the other side of the world where everything was different.

"Let me drive, Mum," I said, "you just talk."

The last bit of sun had slipped behind the faraway Flinders Range. It would be dark soon, but I knew I didn't have to worry about the grays. They knew the way and when they're heading for home they trot along at a good spanking pace.

"Snow falling," Mum said. "Oh, Timmie, some day you must see the snow fall, you must feel the thick soft soundless flakes against your face and watch them turn the world into a fairy tale."

It was black dark now, but soon the sky would be lit with stars. I like driving at night. The buggy wheels rolling and the clop-clop of the grays are part of the big quiet feeling that comes over me.

"A few days before Christmas," Mum went on, "a tall pine tree is set up inside the house, and all sorts of glittery pretty things hung on it with a golden angel on the

topmost branch. All around the bottom of the tree presents are heaped, secret presents for every-one from everyone else.”

For a while we stayed quiet. I thought about snow and Christmas trees and tidy small villages where people lived close to each other. Mum, I suppose, was thinking about when she was a little girl. Suddenly I wondered if she wished she were back in England, and I didn't like that thought at all. Then I started thinking about secret presents. I tasted the words in my mouth. Maybe . . . maybe there was some way I could give Mum a secret present for Christmas. Perhaps I could get Betsy back!

At the gate of the home paddock I gave Mum the reins and jumped down to open the gate. She sighed when I got back in the buggy.

“We should have kept up Christmas here,” she said, “but it's always so hot, it just doesn't seem to belong.”

That was Saturday, the third of December. Next day I had to ride over to the Rileys' for a special setting of eggs that Mrs. Riley had promised Mum. First off, of course, I told them about the party. Dora Riley, who is only seven, said “What's a Christmas tree?” I started to tell her, then suddenly I remembered that I didn't really know. She hung around, her black curls bobbing, her blue eyes wide, while I packed the eggs into my saddle bag.

“Ask your Granny about Christmas,” I said. “She ought to know.”

I suppose it seems queer that none of us knew about Christmas trees, but in the far north of South Australia it's hot most of the year. December is summertime, and the twenty-fifth often enough is a fair scorcher. So our families, who are all hard-working farmers, never bothered to celebrate.

As I got ready to swing into the saddle and get started home, Mr. Riley came out of the harness room with a bridle through his arm.

“Thought I'd try out the mare,” he said. So, I walked over to the stable paddock with him.

Sometimes Betsy made a fuss about being caught. I never had much trouble because I could sort of catch up with her, but Mr. Riley was heavy on his feet. Every time he got near the mare she frisked on her heels and got away. By the time he finally got the bridle on her, Mr. Riley was red and sweaty and his temper was short.

“Does she always act up that way?” he asked.

“Not always, Mr. Riley,” I said.

Suddenly I felt a warm growing hope inside me. Mr. Riley was an all-right sort of person, and if I explained about a Christmas present for Mum, and if the mare kept on being troublesome . . . maybe Mr. Riley would sell her back to me.

You see, I had quite a bit of money of my own at home. My gran in England sent me a gold sovereign every birthday. Mum kept them in a little black tin box with a lock on it. When I was eight she gave me the key and told me the money was my responsibility. The shiny japanned box with gold lines painted round it was on my mind a lot, lying solidly underneath all the other things I thought about. I did whatever odd jobs I could to make more, and in the September Michaelmas Holidays I'd added quite a little to Gran's money by helping Mr. Riley fix his boundary fences.

Ever since I can remember I'd decided what I would do with the money when I had saved enough. I wanted a black mare that was really my own. I wanted to ride through the hills when the golden wattle was in flower. I wanted to take the high jumps in the stable paddock the way Mum did. I dreamed of the day I would enter my own horse in the Mooltana Show and take a couple of prizes. There was about enough money now in the tin box to buy a good horse, but this new idea of a surprise present for Mum sort of shunted the little black horse out of my mind.

School is only six miles from our place, so on Monday I managed to get there before the Rileys and tell the news first about the Christmas party. At playtime they all crowded around me.

"Yes," I said for the hundredth time, "everyone is invited. Little Doctor wants everyone to come."

Before Doctor Brenner settled in Mooltana, and that was only a few years ago, there wasn't a doctor within hundreds of miles. Most of the boys and girls had occasion to know him. He was what we called "square dinkum"—gentle and full of fun. You forgot to be scared even if a tooth had to be yanked out. So if Little Doctor was giving a party we all knew it would be something special.

Every playtime from that day was full of talk about it. The girls stood around under the big gum tree, whispering and giggling about what they were going to wear. We boys pitched horseshoes and took it in our stride.

Billie Riley said carelessly, "Be glad to help you chop down that pine for the Christmas tree. Pa said we could have the dray to take it in to Mooltana. Says he's got to see the Little Doctor anyhow."

Dad was extra busy. So Billie, Mr. Riley and I walked over every bit of the pine hill looking for the best tree. We found a beauty. It had thick outspread branches with fat brown cones on them and it was tall and strong. We sat down on some stumps and rested a while after we got it cut down. Now was my chance I thought. I watched Mr. Riley tamp down the tobacco in his pipe. After he got his smoke going I started to explain.

He listened quietly while I told him how badly Mum missed the roan mare, how she loved to ride.

“I know,” he said. “Life here is kind of hard on your ma. Still and all, Timmie, I paid good money for the mare.”

“I can give you a pound more than you paid for her,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “and . . . I want very much to give Betsy to Mum for a Christmas present.”

He looked at me for a moment and my heart sank to my boots. “My gran in England sends me money every birthday you know, and . . .”

“Yes, I know,” he said. “Want to spend it on your ma, eh, Tim? Well,” he grinned, “I’ve been losing my temper regular with that mare. It’s a bargain, Timmie.”

We shook hands on it. “If we could get Betsy into Mooltana today,” I said, “Little Doctor would keep her his stables till the in party.”

Back at the farm while Mr. Riley was talking to Dad, I dashed up to my room and emptied the sovereigns into a little canvas bag that usually carried my marbles, tying the open end with a piece of string. For a minute I felt a little sick inside. It would be a long time before I could think of owning a beautiful black horse and taking a prize at the show.

I rode Betsy into Mooltana from the Riley place, with Mr. Riley and Billie and the tree in the dray beside me. We stopped at the Little Doctor's house, and it was all right with him so I left Betsy in his stable the few days till Christmas. He got in the dray with us and helped get the tree into the Town Hall.

Billie's eyes popped at the piles of huge cardboard boxes stacked up at one end of the Hall.

“What d’you suppose?” he said in a loud whisper. But Little Doctor hurried us outside. “That’s a fine tree you brought,” he said. “I’m much obliged to you.”

When I got home Mum had the bedroom all spread out with things from the old tin trunk, a small, worried frown between her eyes. She was looking at some thin white stuff with pink rosebuds sprigged on it.

'This will make a lovely dress for little Dora Riley,' she said, half to herself. That stuff had been a dress Mum had worn to the church social. I remember how pretty she'd looked. She was small as a minute and slim, and her eyes were deep, deep brown.

We were up before sunrise on the morning of the twenty-fourth. Like a miracle it rained during the night. It was fine helping Mum with the farm chores. The earth looked as though it had just been scrubbed, and the scent steaming up from it was a strange lovely mixture of all growing things. The woodbine creeper was still trembly with raindrops and sweeter than honey. I stuck my nose into the cabbage rose by the back gate, and the pink squashy petals were wet and spicy.

I was helping Mum with the milking when the sun came up. The old gray kookaburra in the gum tree began to chuckle, then worked himself up to rowdy laughter, the way he always does at sunrise. "It won't be dusty driving in, and it will be cool all day," said Dad, who, tired as he was, had started to get interested in the party along with Mum and me.

We climbed into the double seater buggy a bit before one. We had to pick up some of the Rileys because they don't own a buggy big enough for all of them.

It was half-past five before we got to Mooltana and six before we had the horses unharnessed, and ourselves tidied up. Mum had made over one of Dad's old suits for me, and pressed one of Dad's old ties for him so it looked like new. Her green dress looked pretty with a new frill. We all felt quite handsome.

The Town Hall is just a plain wooden building. It's like a barn inside with wooden rafters, kerosene lamps swinging from the ceiling on long chains, and a raised wooden stage at one end. But it didn't look like itself when we got there that evening. All the bare windows were garlanded with gumtree branches. Chinese lanterns, dozens of them, were strung across the room. There was an all-over sound of voices and laughter, not loud but excited and happy. Little Doctor and Mrs. Brenner were being everywhere at once. And in the center of the room was the tree!

So that was a Christmas tree! I wanted to sit by myself and really look at it. It reached almost to the ceiling, and hundreds of little white wax candles were perched on the branches. Packages in bright, colored paper dangled, and heaps of them were

piled around the bottom. The golden angel was there too, just as Mum had told me, floating on the top branch as though she watched over the whole thing.

After Little Doctor was sure we were all there he got up on the stage and told us how he'd tried to make the tree like the one he'd had as a boy. "Only thing," he said, "I couldn't manage the snow for outdoors."

Well, then the presents were given out. They'd been ordered weeks before from Adelaide over three hundred miles away. There were presents for everyone and some left over. Tops, paint boxes, balls, books, cricket bats, pocketknives, dolls, sewing sets, doll furniture...The sighs and the o-ohs and the a-ahs went around the room in waves.

Dora Riley came running over to me with a china doll. "Look, Timmie, she's got a petticoat, shoes and a hat and drawers . . . and they all come off."

I got Kipling's *Jungle Book* (Little Doctor knew I was keen about Kipling) and a big bag of marbles.

After the presents were given out, Tim Mahoney, the constable, and Dad climbed on ladders and lit the little candles on the tree.

"Looks as though the stars came down to roost, Timmie," Mum said. But I didn't want to talk.

Later Dad came over and sat beside us. "I've something special for you, Timmie," he said, sort of awkwardly. I unwrapped the box he handed me, and inside was a heavy round glass ball with a green Christmas tree painted inside. When I turned it upside down the inside was filled with whirling tiny white blobs. "So you'll know about snow falling," Dad said.

It was beautiful. And to know Dad had had Dr. Brenner get it for him when he sent for the other presents! I turned it and turned it and thought I would never get tired of looking at it.

"Mum," I said looking up. But Mum's eyes were filled with tears. Suddenly I felt heavy inside me, and I thought again, "Mum wants to live in England; she doesn't really like it here."

We had supper—sandwiches, milk, cocoa, cake, and little biscuits with "hundreds and thousands" sprinkled on top of them. We were the last to leave and Doctor Brenner, who was at the door saying good night to everyone, walked with us to where Dad was harnessing the horses to the buggy in the Town Hall paddock. And there standing by the buggy was Betsy. Little Doctor put his arm round my



shoulders. I was shaking with excitement. Then he shoved me forward gently. I went over to the mare and handed the reins to Mum.

“It’s my Christmas present, Mum,” I said. “I bought her back for you.”

“Betsy,” Mum said softly, “darling Betsy.” Then she turned to me. “But I don’t understand, Timmie . . . it’s not possible, how could you?” Then after a minute she said, “Oh, Timmie, Gran’s money . . . you spent Gran’s money for me. The money that was to buy the little black horse. Timmie, Timmie.”

“Gosh, Mum,” I said, feeling awkward and funny about it. “I’d rather have Betsy round anyway.”

Then Dad was there and the slow look he gave me told me he was pleased with what I’d done.

But Mum bent down and kissed me and her cheek was wet against mine.

Billie Riley rode the mare to our farm and planned to spend the night with us. I sat on the back seat of the buggy with Mum, as Mr. Riley was up front with Dad. She tucked her arm around me.

“Such a lovely, lovely evening, wasn’t it, Timmie?” Mum said.

I leaned against her. “Mum,” I said because I still wasn’t sure, “if you could live anywhere you wanted, where would you choose?”

For a second there wasn’t a sound. Then Mum started to laugh, a happy bubbling sound.

“What a foolish, foolish question, Timmie love,” she said. “Only one place of course. I chose it long ago; right here on the farm with you and your father . . . and Betsy. You’ve been worrying about those tears back at the party. They were happy ones. But, oh, Timmie, I did miss Betsy. It was silly of me, but you’ve made everything perfect.” I could feel her looking at me seriously. “I love Australia, too, Timmie, even though I wasn’t born here.”

I cupped the glass between my hands and wished that particular moment would last forever.

The Southern Cross sprawled big and brilliant against the sky. The buggy wheels, the trotting grays and Betsy’s clip-clop behind us melted into nothingness.

Next thing I knew Mum was shaking me gently. “Wake up, Timmie dear,” she said, “and help your father with the horses. We’re home again, and it’s Christmas Day.”